The Shadow Below

Jan Lavrinovski

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The Curse of Gallowsmere

I arrived in Gallowsmere at dusk, when the last traces of sunlight failed to reach the valley, and the creeping fog swallowed the streets whole. The place reeked of damp rot, wood long warped by endless rains, and the strange, bitter scent of burning tallow. No one welcomed me—not in words, at least. The few figures that dared linger on the streets kept their heads low, their eyes darting toward the darkened corners of their town, where shadows stretched too far and too deep for comfort.

Word had reached me on the road—a curse, they whispered. Some sickness gnawed at the town's children, a wasting ailment that no cleric's blessing could mend. It stole their warmth first, left them shivering even before their skin paled and their voices grew thin. And then came the murmuring. Those who lived long enough to still speak whispered fevered nonsense in their beds, glassy-eyed and trembling. They spoke of The Cold Man.

A title, a warning, a prayer—I knew not which.

I had come either out of duty or desperation. Perhaps Baron Atheldred had summoned me, his coffers still deep enough to buy what the gods had refused him. Or perhaps I had simply wandered here, drawn by the scent of something old, something wrong, something that felt like it needed killing.

The wind howled through the crooked streets, rattling empty lanterns and scattering dead leaves in my path. A shiver ran through me—not from cold, but from the weight of unseen eyes upon my back. I pressed forward, past darkened doorways where figures stood half-hidden, watching, always watching.

Somewhere in the distance, a child cried—a thin, reedy sound that barely carried through the fog. Then, as if snuffed out, it stopped.

I tightened my grip on my sword.

Gallowsmere was waiting.

I made my way through the town, my boots clacking against the worn cobblestones, their surfaces slick with age and disuse. Gallowsmere was old—older than it should have been. The town's bones were those of another time, another era, before its people had even given it a name. The buildings, hunched and weary, leaned against one another as if whispering their secrets in the dim light. The deeper I walked into its heart, the more I felt it—a weight in the air, pressing against my skin like a hand against my chest.

This place had a past, and pasts were dangerous things.

I found the priest at the threshold of his chapel, its door half-open, candlelight flickering feebly against the encroaching dark. He was an old man, thin and pale, with a face like worn parchment, lines carved deep by years of prayer or sorrow—I could not yet tell which. He clutched his robes tight, his fingers trembling just slightly as he beckoned me inside.

“Traveler,” he murmured, his voice soft but heavy, like a man who had grown used to speaking to the dead. “You should not have come.”

I stepped inside regardless. The air within was thick with incense and old wax, but neither could mask the scent of mildew or the deeper, underlying trace of something long buried. It was a humble place—rows of wooden pews, an altar of faded stone, and a single stained-glass window that depicted a robed figure standing before a black abyss.

“Father Roen,” I said, watching the way his eyes flickered toward the door, toward the town beyond. “Tell me of this place.”

He exhaled slowly, as if drawing breath for the first time in years.

“Gallowsmere was not always Gallowsmere,” he said. “Before the town, before the farms and the streets and the lives lived here, there was only the monastery.”

The word settled between us like a stone.

“Built by an old order of monks,” he continued, moving to the altar as he spoke, his fingers tracing the grooves in the stone. “They sought isolation, solitude. A place where they could be closer to the divine, or so they claimed. But there are whispers that they sought something else.” He glanced at me then, his gaze sharp, searching. “Something that should not have been found.”

I knew that tone. I had heard it before in forgotten ruins, in cursed lands, in places where men had dug too deep, uncovered things that refused to stay buried.

“Something beneath,” I said.

Father Roen’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Yes,” he admitted. “The monastery stood for centuries, its monks devoted, its walls unshaken. And then, one night, it vanished.”

I frowned. “Vanished?”

“The records end,” he said simply. “No mention of fire, no sign of siege. One year, the monastery stood proud upon the hill. The next, it was abandoned, its halls cold, its doors yawning open like a mouth that had swallowed its last prayer. The monks were gone. Not a body was found.”

A chill settled in my spine, the kind that had nothing to do with the night air.

“The town came after?” I asked.

“Yes,” Roen nodded. “Built atop the ruins. Stones from the monastery were used to raise homes, build roads, even carve this very altar.” He tapped the stone with his fingers. “For a time, Gallowsmere thrived. The soil was fertile, the waters clean. And then, as the years passed, something changed.”

I did not speak. I let the silence stretch, waiting.

“It started small,” he continued at last. “Fewer births, more sickness. The winter winds grew harsher, and the sun never seemed to linger in our valley. We thought it misfortune. But misfortune does not whisper in the night. Misfortune does not steal the warmth from our children’s beds. Misfortune does not have a name.”

I understood then.

“The Cold Man,” I said.

Father Roen nodded, his shoulders hunched, as if the mere words bore weight.

I glanced toward the stained-glass window, its robed figure standing at the abyss.

The abyss was staring back.

I left the chapel with Father Roen’s warning curling in my thoughts like the tendrils of mist that crept along the cobblestones. The cold here was not the bite of winter nor the damp chill of rain-soaked earth—it was deeper, unnatural, as if something beneath the town drank the warmth from the very air.

I tightened my cloak around my shoulders and walked further into Gallowsmere, its streets winding like veins through a body long since emptied of life.

And then I saw her.

A child, standing alone in the dim light of a guttering lantern. Her hair was black as the night sky, her dress thin and ragged, her bare feet unmoving upon the stone. She stared at me, unblinking, her eyes wide—not with fear, but with something deeper, something knowing.

I slowed my steps. “Girl,” I said.

She did not answer.

I took another step toward her, and in the space of a breath, she was gone.

Not fled. Not turned a corner. Simply not there.

The lantern beside her flickered wildly, then died altogether.

A whisper, too faint to grasp, curled through the fog.

I exhaled, gripping the hilt of my sword though I knew steel would do no good against ghosts. Gallowsmere was watching me. Testing me.

And I was not alone.

Down a narrow alley, I glimpsed the hunched figure of a beggar slumped against a wooden door, his ragged cloak wrapped tight around his body. His head lolled forward, the folds of his hood hiding his face, his body utterly still. The cold had not been kind to him.

I stepped closer.

The door behind him was locked from the inside. No footprints led to where he sat.

The weight in my chest pressed heavier.

I reached out, hesitated, then pulled back the hood.

His face was frozen in place—eyes wide, mouth stretched in a silent scream, skin so pale it seemed almost translucent. Frost clung to his lashes and the tips of his beard, his lips cracked and blue. His hands, locked tight in his lap, had pressed themselves into the fabric of his cloak so hard that his fingernails had cracked.

I had seen death before. But not like this.

Not without a struggle.

Not in a place where the cold should not have been enough to kill a man.

The door behind him creaked.

I left him there. Whatever had claimed him was done with him. I would not disturb its work.

But Gallowsmere had one more secret waiting.

At the town's center stood a well, its stones black with age, its edges smoothed by generations of hands drawing water. I paused beside it, drawn to its depth. The night stretched long within it, the stars above reflected in its darkness.

The wind died. The world hushed.

And then, as if rising from the bottom of the abyss, a voice coiled into my ears.

"They buried it deep. But it remembers."

I stiffened.

The voice was not my own.

"Not dead. Not dreaming. Just waiting."

I stepped back from the well, pulse quickening, the words clinging to my mind like a sickness.

Whatever they had buried, whatever the monks had sought to keep from the world, it was still down there.

And it was waking.

The road to the abbey was little more than a trail of broken stones and forgotten prayers, winding through the outskirts of Gallowsmere like a scar across the land. The air was colder here, sharper, as if the valley itself recoiled from what lay ahead. Even the trees, gnarled and hollow, seemed to lean away from the path, their twisted branches clawing at the sky in silent warning.

Father Roen had given me little guidance, only a weary look and a murmured plea before pressing a small iron pendant into my hand. A simple thing, marked with the sigil of a long-dead order, its edges worn smooth by time and touch. He had said no words of blessing, no prayers for protection. He had only told me this:

"If you hear the bells, do not answer."

It was not the warning of a priest. It was the warning of a man who had seen something and lived long enough to regret it.

The villagers I passed on my way gave me no farewell. A woman in a tattered shawl glanced at me from behind a shutter, her fingers trembling at her lips. A man, bent with age, made the sign of warding as I walked past, his eyes avoiding mine. They had all already buried me in their minds.

The abbey stood atop a lonely hill at the town's edge, its silhouette jagged against the starless sky. Even from a distance, I could see the weight of ruin upon it—collapsed walls, arched windows long since shattered, their glass scattered like forgotten promises among the weeds. The great bell tower, once proud, was nothing more than a blackened rib jutting from the carcass of stone.

As I drew closer, the silence deepened. The wind, which had whispered through the town, died altogether. No crickets called, no owls stirred. Even the trees here stood motionless, as if frozen in expectation.

The entrance lay open before me, yawning like the mouth of some long-starved beast. The keystone above the arch still bore the remnants of a symbol, half-worn away by the centuries. What little remained was unsettling—a sun, but cracked, its rays curling inward instead of outward. A light devoured rather than given.

I stepped inside.

The first thing I noticed was the dust—or rather, the absence of it. A ruin so long abandoned should have been choked with the weight of time, but here the floors were bare, as if something still moved through these halls, still walked these corridors.

Something had been waiting.

I ran my fingers along the cold stone walls, feeling the grooves where monks had once pressed their hands in prayer. There were faded murals here, their paint flaking, their figures half-erased. I traced the outline of a robed figure standing before an abyss, arms raised, face obscured. The same figure from the chapel's stained glass.

Behind me, the wind picked up, though the trees had not moved. It rushed through the ruins like a sigh, winding through empty corridors, through doorways that should have led to nothing. And then I heard it.

A bell.

Faint. Hollow.

But it was there.

My grip tightened around my sword.

I had not seen a bell. There was no bell. Not anymore.

I exhaled, slow and steady. The weight of the silence pressed against my ears, thick and smothering, and for a moment, just a moment, I swore I heard footsteps.

Not mine.

I took another step forward.

If the horrors of Gallowsmere had a beginning, I would find it here.

The Forgotten Abbey

The ruins of the abbey loomed before me, half-consumed by the darkness that pooled around its crumbling walls. Moonlight seeped through gaps in the clouds, casting thin slivers of pale light across the structure. In that cold illumination, the place seemed less like a building and more like a relic of some distant, forgotten past—something that had clawed its way up from beneath the earth, struggling for breath against the encroaching night.

The path to the entrance was overgrown, the stones uneven, buckled by time and nature. Ivy strangled the walls, its dark tendrils weaving through cracked stone and crumbling mortar as if trying to drag the place down. The closer I came, the more the silence seemed to tighten, the air heavy and expectant, like the pause before a storm.

I approached the main entrance—an arched doorway, the wooden doors long gone, leaving behind a gaping mouth of shadow. But it wasn't the darkness inside that caught my eye—it was the doorframe itself, the stone worn smooth except for a series of strange runes carved deeply into the arch.

They were like no script I had seen before. The symbols twisted and coiled across the stone, their shapes angular yet fluid, as if they had been carved not by human hands but by something with a sense for shapes that should not be. As I drew closer, they seemed to catch the light, reflecting the moon's glow with a faint, almost imperceptible pulse.

For a moment, I stood there, just staring at those runes, my hand resting on the pommel of my sword. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, a silent warning that something was wrong. The air grew colder, as if the very stones of the abbey exhaled frost. I glanced back over my shoulder—nothing but the twisted trees and distant rooftops of Gallowsmere, the town lying hushed and still beneath the weight of night.

Then, from somewhere deep within the ruins, a sound—a low, distant moan, like wind through a hollow chamber, but wrong. The kind of sound that made the skin tighten across your spine, that spoke of emptiness and echoes and things long since left behind.

I reached out and touched the runes. Cold, as I expected. But as my fingertips brushed the stone, the symbols flared for the briefest instant—a flicker of pale blue, a heartbeat of light—then dimmed, leaving a ghostly afterimage in my vision. I pulled my hand back sharply, every instinct in me screaming to turn around, to leave this place and not look back.

But I was here for answers. For Gallowsmere, and for myself.

I stepped across the threshold, into the ruins of the abbey.

The shadows swallowed me whole.

The air inside was stale, cold enough to see my breath. Moonlight filtered through gaps in the ceiling, casting uneven patches of light across the stone floors. The walls seemed to close in around me, the architecture warped, as if the building itself had slumped over the centuries, sinking into the earth beneath it. Ivy had pierced through the windows, spreading across the floors in tangled heaps, its leaves gray and brittle.

It was like stepping into the mouth of a tomb, where even time seemed reluctant to pass. Every footfall sent echoes rippling through the corridors, a soft shuffle that somehow sounded too loud, too clear. As if I wasn't alone.

The runes on the doorway, their faint pulse still lingering in my mind, marked this place as something different, something touched by the arcane. I'd seen old magic before—wards of protection, or of warning—but this was something else entirely. Something older, darker.

And somewhere, buried deep within these broken walls, lay whatever the monks of old had hidden away. Whatever they had died to keep silent.

I took a deep breath and pressed on, deeper into the shadows, into the heart of the abbey where the horrors were said to have begun.

The silence inside the abbey was thick, pressing against my ears like the weight of deep water. My footsteps echoed, too loud, bouncing off the crumbling walls and vanishing into the dark corridors beyond. The air here was colder than it had any right to be, the kind of cold that crept under the skin and settled in the marrow. It smelled of damp stone and rot, the sharp tang of mildew clinging to the ruins like a sickness.

I ran my fingers over the grooves in the nearest wall—deep scratches, uneven and jagged. Not the marks of time, but of hands. Clawing. Digging.

The wind moaned through the broken windows, shifting the tattered remains of old banners that hung limp from the ceiling, their symbols long faded. The monastery had been abandoned for centuries, yet I could feel something here. The weight of presence.

And then I saw him.

A figure in the corridor ahead, barely more than a silhouette in the dim light. He moved slowly, his robes heavy and dark, swaying with each step. A monk—if monks still walked where the living had long since fled.

I held my breath, waiting, watching. He did not react to me. Did not turn, did not stop. He walked with a purpose, his steps steady, unbroken, his hands clasped before him as though in prayer.

But there was something wrong with the way he moved. His feet barely seemed to touch the stone, and as he passed through a beam of moonlight, I saw the truth—he cast no shadow.

I exhaled slowly, my grip tightening around my sword. I had seen spirits before, had faced things that did not bleed, did not die. This one did not seem to notice me. Not yet.

The monk's hood hung low, shrouding his face in darkness, and yet I could feel his gaze. Even without eyes, he was watching me.

He reached the center of the great hall and stopped. The air grew colder. My breath fogged in front of me.

Then, as if some invisible force had seized him, the monk's body jerked backward, his arms thrown out, his chest arching—his head snapped back violently, a soundless scream frozen in his posture. His hands clawed at the air, grasping at something unseen.

And then he was gone.

No slow fade, no dissolving into mist—just gone, as though he had never been there at all. The air where he had stood rippled, as if disturbed, and I could still feel the faint pressure of his presence, as though something had been pulled from the air itself.

I swallowed hard, my heartbeat slow and deliberate, my fingers stiff from the cold. This was no mere haunt, no restless spirit lingering on the edge of the veil.

This was a memory.

A death, preserved in the bones of the abbey.

Something had killed him here.

And whatever it was, it was still watching.

The silence after the monk's disappearance pressed in around me, thick and expectant. I took another step forward, my breath steady, my boots careful on the uneven stones. The abbey was not as empty as it seemed.

I had two choices—the path that led to the bell tower, a skeletal spire of blackened stone looming above the rest of the ruins, or the corridor that curved downward into what might have once been the library. Both carried a weight to them, the kind of pull that made the air feel heavier, the kind that promised answers and danger in equal measure.

I chose the bell tower first.

The stairway winding upward was narrow and steep, its walls slick with damp, the scent of rot thickening with each step. Above, the rafters groaned as if shifting under a weight unseen. The wind howled through the broken slats of wood, but no wind could account for the whisper I heard just beyond my ear.

It spoke no words. Just a breath. A presence.

I reached the top and found the bell—ancient, rusted, hanging by chains so thin and brittle they should not have been able to hold its weight. The wood of the beams above was blackened, scarred as if by fire, and the air smelled of something burnt and long forgotten.

Then the bell tolled.

A single, deep, resonant chime.

I did not touch it. I had not even drawn close enough for the wind to move it.

The toll vibrated through the walls, shaking dust loose from the rafters. The sound was deep, hollow, wrong. The kind of sound that did not fade as it should, but instead stretched into the air, lingering, curling like unseen fingers around the back of my neck.

The shadows in the corners thickened.

And then it stepped forward.

A Gallows Wraith.

Its form was draped in rotted cloth, its face hidden beneath the folds of a hood that seemed to swallow the light. Its hands—long, bony, blackened as if burnt—hung at its sides. And yet I knew the moment I moved, they would rise.

It did not float toward me. It dragged itself forward, its feet unseen beneath the tattered remains of a robe. The chains wrapped around its arms rattled, scraping against the stone. The weight of its presence bore down on me, heavy, suffocating.

I knew better than to linger.

I turned and descended the stairs fast, the echoes of its rattling chains chasing me down. The moment my feet hit the main floor of the abbey once more, the air lightened. I glanced back up the stairwell, half-expecting to see the hooded figure staring down at me.

Nothing.

But the silence left behind still rang in my ears.

I did not look back again. Instead, I took the second path, moving deeper into the ruins, toward the place where knowledge had been kept.

The library was not marked by an archway or grand doors—it was half-buried beneath collapsed stone, the remnants of its entrance barely wide enough for a man to slip through. I stepped over broken wooden beams, past shelves warped with age, their books blackened with mold and moisture. But among the ruin, there was a table—intact, untouched.

And on it, a collection of preserved tomes.

I brushed the dust from their spines. The script on the covers was ancient, written in a language I had seen before in scattered ruins and forgotten places. Monastic script, twisted and altered, no longer purely of human design. I opened one, my fingers trailing over brittle pages.

The words described the fall of the monks. Not as history, but as a warning. Their prayers had turned to whispers. Their chants had become pleadings. The deeper they sought the divine, the closer they came to something else.

The text spoke of a ritual. A final attempt to contain what they had awakened.

But one thing was missing.

A space on the table, clear of dust, the absence stark against the decay of the rest of the library. One book had been taken.

Recently.

The question was—by who?

And worse—why?

The stillness of the library was suffocating, thick with dust and the weight of the past. The missing book's absence gnawed at my thoughts, a hollow space where knowledge should have been. Whoever had taken it had done so with intent, but for what purpose, I did not yet know.

Then, the temperature dropped.

Not the slow seep of evening chill, but an unnatural, biting cold that set my nerves on edge. My breath misted in front of me, the air thin and sharp. The shadows between the shelves deepened, pooling like ink.

And then I saw him.

A figure hunched at one of the desks, his robes tattered and gray with age, his skeletal hands hovering over an open tome that no longer existed. His quill scratched against parchment that had long since turned to dust, his movements methodical, frantic, endless.

I took a step forward, my boots scuffing against stone.

The scribe stopped writing.

His head lifted slowly, his hollow eyes locking onto mine. His face—once that of a scholar—was worn and stretched, his mouth opening as if to speak, but the first sound that came was not a voice. It was a rasp, dry and broken, as if his lungs had forgotten the act of breath long ago.

"You must find it," he whispered, his voice thin, strained.

I did not speak. I waited.

"They have it," he continued, his trembling fingers curling against his robes. "They do not know what they hold. If they open it, if they speak the words…"

His form flickered, the light from the shattered windows distorting his outline.

"They must not wake it," he whispered. His voice carried no anger, only exhaustion—pleading. "It is not meant to be spoken."

"Who took the book?" I asked.

His body trembled, his hands twitching over his empty desk, as if desperate to continue writing. "Shadows in robes. But they are not monks." His eyes darkened, a hollow depth forming where pupils should have been. "They are not monks."

And then, as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone—vanished in a whisper of cold air, leaving only the scent of ink and decay in his wake.

His warning lingered.

The book had been taken.

And if I did not find it first, they would open it.

The scribe's words still echoed in my mind as I moved deeper into the ruins, toward the part of the abbey where the walls had crumbled entirely.

There, among the wreckage, stood the altar.

It was long abandoned, cracked and worn, the stone blackened as if by fire. The wood of the pulpit beside it had rotted through, the symbols carved into its surface nothing more than faint impressions of a lost faith.

But something was wrong.

At first, I thought it a trick of the light. The red hue pooling at the base of the altar seemed almost natural in the dim glow of the moon. But as I stepped closer, my stomach tightened.

It was fresh.

A thin, glistening trickle of blood ran down the altar's edge, as though the stone itself still remembered its purpose. The scent of iron filled my nose, sharp, real.

And then, the whisper came.

Not a voice this time. Not a presence.

But a sound. A single drip, echoing into the silence.

I reached out, pressing my fingers to the surface. The stone was warm, pulsing faintly beneath my touch. The blood was not old. It had no right to be there, not after centuries of ruin. And yet, here it was.

The markings around the altar were still visible—worn, faded, but deliberate. A pattern of circles, intersecting lines, symbols that had meaning beyond prayer.

This had not been a place of worship.

It had been a seal.

And the seal was breaking.

I stepped back, my mind racing through possibilities. Something had begun to wake. Something hungry.

The puzzle was clear—I had to complete the seal. To cleanse the altar, to stop whatever bled through from whatever lay beneath. But the symbols had worn away. The pattern had been lost.

I would have to find the missing pieces.

And I would have to do it before midnight, before the blood began to pour.

The air had changed.

Even as the blood upon the altar cooled and the last whispers of the blind scribe faded into silence, something in the ruins had shifted. The stillness no longer felt empty—it felt expectant. The abbey was no longer merely a place of the past. It was alive, stirring beneath the weight of centuries.

I ran my hand along the altar once more, tracing the worn grooves of the broken seal. My fingers drifted over the stone, following the cracks where time had undone the monks' desperate work. And then I felt it—a hollow space beneath the surface.

I stepped back, scanning the ground. The floor around the altar was uneven, the ancient tiles disrupted by the shifting of earth beneath. But at the base of the structure, beneath the creeping ivy and the dust of centuries, the faint outline of a trapdoor lay hidden in the stone.

I knelt, brushing away the debris, feeling the indentations where a handle once sat. The monks had sealed it. Buried it. Hidden it.

And yet, something had begun to undo their work.

I pressed against the edges of the stone slab. It did not budge. The weight of time held it fast, but I knew this was no ordinary passage. The monks had sealed it not just with mortar, but with prayer and fear.

A whisper of wind curled through the ruins, stirring the dust at my feet. A faint pressure built behind my ears, not pain, but a shift—a recognition.

The words came to me not as thought, but as memory. A prayer not spoken in devotion, but in desperation.

I exhaled.

And then, without knowing why, I spoke the words aloud.

The air tightened. The ground shuddered.

And the stone moved.

A groan of grinding rock filled the chamber as the slab slid aside, revealing a stairwell descending into darkness. The air that drifted up from below was wrong—damp, cold, but stale, as if it had not been touched by wind or time in ages.

I stared down into the abyss. My own breath felt too loud, too real.

The monks had built this place for worship.

And then they had built something beneath it to hide what they had found.

Whatever lay below, the monks had tried to forget it.

And now, I was about to remember it.

I gripped my weapon, exhaled once more, and began the descent.

The Hollow Deep

The stairwell swallowed me whole.

The moment my boots touched the first step, the air thickened, pressing in around me like the weight of unseen hands. The cold was immediate—not the chill of deep earth, not the damp embrace of stone long forgotten, but something worse. Something unnatural.

I descended.

The stairs were worn smooth by time, their edges rounded, slick with moisture. They spiraled downward in tight, suffocating coils, the walls narrowing around me, rough stone brushing my shoulders. My breath echoed against them, soft, uneven.

Step after step, the descent continued.

At first, I counted them, more out of habit than purpose. Fifty. A hundred. Two hundred. The air grew colder. The walls felt closer. The flickering light of my torch barely touched them now, swallowed by a darkness that seemed to drink the flame rather than be chased away by it.

The silence deepened.

There should have been the usual sounds of a place like this—the distant drip of water, the shuffle of loose pebbles dislodged beneath my boots. But there was nothing. Even the echo of my footsteps seemed muted, swallowed before they could return to my ears.

The further I went, the more the air itself felt wrong. It had weight to it, as if something unseen was pressing down, watching, listening.

I stopped.

I had lost count of the steps long ago, but the unease creeping through my bones told me something was wrong.

I turned my head slightly, glancing back up the stairwell.

The light from above was gone.

No faint glow from the surface, no trace of the ruined abbey above. Just blackness.

I swallowed.

I could still go back.

But even as the thought crossed my mind, something within me whispered that there was no turning back now.

I took another step downward.

The air shifted.

Not wind—something else. A ripple through the silence, a pressure behind my ears, like something vast had just moved in the dark below.

I pressed forward.

The staircase wound further, deeper, stretching time and distance in ways that should not have been possible. My legs ached, my breathing slowed, and yet the steps continued. The stone underfoot had changed, subtly at first—smoother, colder, more like polished obsidian than carved rock.

Then I saw them.

Carvings along the walls, shallow engravings barely visible in the dying glow of my torch. I ran my fingers over them, feeling the shapes beneath my touch.

Not words.

Not prayers.

Faces.

Hollow-eyed, mouths open in silent screams. Thousands of them, twisted in agony, carved into the very bones of the stairwell. The stone had been worked by careful hands, each face unique, etched with the precision of one who knew suffering well.

And then, just beyond the reach of my torchlight, a shadow moved.

I was not alone.

The staircase finally ended, though it was not a relief. The descent had taken too long, far longer than it should have. My legs ached, and yet I could not remember the last time I had needed to breathe deeply. Time had stretched down here, twisting around me like the roots of some unseen tree.

Before me stretched a long, narrow corridor, its walls of black stone slick with damp. The air was thicker here, heavier with something I could not name. A presence. A pressure.

And then I saw them.

Lining the corridor on both sides, standing in still, silent rows, were figures in robes.

No—not figures. Skeletons.

Each was draped in the tattered remnants of monk's robes, their fabric stiff with age, discolored with time and something darker. Their skulls tilted at odd angles, some resting against the wall as if sleep had taken them mid-prayer. Others stood with backs straight, watching, though they had no eyes with which to do so.

Some had their hands folded before them, their fingers locked in gestures of devotion. Others had their arms outstretched, as if reaching—or warning.

And then I heard it.

A whisper.

Soft, dry, barely more than the scrape of wind over stone.

I turned my head slightly, listening, but the words made no sense. Not in any tongue I knew. The voices of the dead filled the air, distant and layered, some murmuring prayers, others sobbing quietly. The whispers were endless, filling every hollow space in the corridor.

And yet, there was no wind.

I stepped forward, careful.

The path between them was narrow. Close enough that if I stretched out my arms, I could brush the fabric of their robes, the brittle edges of bone. Too close.

I did not trust them to remain still.

I moved slow, measured, my breath controlled. They were watching me. I could feel it. My instincts screamed that if I moved too fast, if I faltered, if I so much as brushed against them —

One of the skeletons shifted.

A slight twitch of the fingers, a subtle tilt of the head. The whispers grew sharper, as if reacting to my presence. The air felt tight, closing in.

The further I walked, the more I noticed. Some of the skeletons had their jaws forced open, their skulls cracked as if something had tried to pull them apart. Others bore deep claw marks along their bones, as though they had tried to tear something out of themselves.

The whispers changed.

One voice rose above the rest.

"Do not wake them."

It came from nowhere and everywhere.

A single misstep. A shift of fabric. The brush of my cloak against the nearest figure.

The whispering stopped.

Every skeleton in the corridor turned their heads toward me.

And then, in unison, they began to move.

The whispering stopped.

The corridor of robed skeletons had not been the first sign that something here was wrong, but it was the first time I truly felt its gaze settle upon me. Whatever had been buried beneath the abbey had not been forgotten. It had waited. And now it was aware.

I pressed forward, deeper into the Hollow Deep, where the walls no longer seemed made of carved stone, but of something else—something smooth, impossibly dark, swallowing the light of my torch before it could reach far. I did not know how far down I had gone, nor how much time had passed.

That was when I saw the lantern.

It hung from a rusted iron hook in the center of the corridor, swinging gently, though there was no wind to stir it. Its flame burned a sickly green, casting flickering shapes upon the walls. For a moment, I hesitated. The corridor beyond it split into three separate paths, each leading into identical archways.

I had not seen those paths before.

I stepped closer, eyes narrowing. The lantern's glow shifted, stretching the shadows unnaturally, the walls warping beneath its light. One of the paths led forward. Another curved to the right. The last sloped downward into what looked like another stairwell.

But something was wrong.

I turned, stepping slightly out of the lantern's reach—and the paths were gone.

Only a single corridor stretched ahead of me now, the false archways dissolved into smooth, unbroken walls. The moment the lantern's glow no longer touched them, the illusions faded.

I had heard of such things before—artifacts that did not guide travelers, but mislead them.

The Lantern of Lies.

A cursed relic, meant to lead the unwary deeper, further, forever. If I had stepped into one of those false paths, I might have walked into solid stone, or worse—somewhere that was not meant to be walked at all.

I reached up and extinguished the flame.

The corridor remained still. No false paths. No illusions. Only one way forward.

I left the lantern behind, its green ember still glowing faintly within the glass, as if waiting for another traveler to trust it.

The air grew thicker the further I went, the silence heavier. I no longer trusted what my eyes saw, nor what my ears heard.

That was when I noticed the footsteps.

They were not mine.

I turned my head slightly, listening. The sound came a second too late, an echo that was not an echo. I slowed my steps, and yet the sound followed after. Mimicking me.

I exhaled.

"Who's there?"

Silence.

Then, from behind me, my own voice spoke back.

"Who's there?"

Not an exact match. There was a delay. A hesitation. And something else—something flat, empty of breath, empty of life.

I turned.

The corridor stretched behind me, empty except for the shifting shadows cast by my torchlight.

And yet I knew.

They were watching.

The Faceless Ones.

Not creatures, not ghosts. Not even echoes. Reflections that had slipped free of the surface they belonged to.

I took another step forward.

A second later, the sound followed.

I turned a corner, walking faster now, my breath steady, my grip firm on the hilt of my weapon. But they followed. Always a step behind, always repeating my movements just a fraction too late.

Then they spoke again.

But this time, it was not my voice.

It was a voice I had never heard before.

And it whispered:

"We see you."

The torchlight flickered.

And the shadows moved.

The Faceless Ones did not follow when I entered the next chamber. Or perhaps they did, and I simply could no longer see them. Either way, I had no desire to test my luck. I pressed forward, past the threshold of an arched doorway carved with the same twisting symbols I had seen in the stairwell.

The chamber beyond was vast, impossibly so. My torch barely reached the edges, the light swallowed by a ceiling that stretched too high for a place buried so deep beneath the earth. The walls, like those before, were carved, but here the symbols were larger, more deliberate. Not prayers, not warnings. These were records.

The story of the abbey was not one of faith, but of fear.

I ran my fingers over the worn engravings, my breath steady as I followed the images from one panel to the next.

The first carvings depicted monks in prayer, their robes flowing, their hands raised toward the heavens. That was the lie—the version the world above had been told. But as I followed the mural's progression, the truth began to reveal itself.

The monks had not come here to worship.

They had come here to bury something.

Another panel showed them descending, much as I had, torches in hand, faces set in grim determination. They were not seeking enlightenment. They were seeking containment.

In the next carving, they stood around a pit—a pit that yawned open in the center of the chamber, black and endless. Their hands were raised not in supplication, but in ritual. They were sealing something away.

A final image sent a shiver through me.

The monks, kneeling before their own altar, their faces twisted in agony. Some had gouged their own eyes, others had clawed at their throats, as if trying to silence themselves forever.

And at the heart of the engraving, beneath their writhing forms, was a single black shape, carved deep into the stone. A void given form. A nameless thing, reaching with too many arms, stretching from the abyss below.

I exhaled.

The monks had never been priests. They had been wardens.

The abbey had not been built to bring men closer to their gods. It had been built to keep something locked away.

And now, after centuries of neglect, that lock was breaking.

The weight of realization settled in my chest. The book—the one stolen from the library—was never meant to be read. It had contained the final words of the last warden, a warning, a guide, perhaps even a means to reinforce the seal.

Now it was in the hands of those who did not understand what they held.

Or worse—those who did.

I turned from the carvings, my breath steady.

I had come seeking answers.

Now, I had found them.

And if I did not act quickly, I would soon find the thing they had been meant to contain.

The passage beyond the carvings sloped downward at a gradual, deceptive angle. I did not notice at first—only that my footing felt strange, as if the stone beneath me were shifting ever so slightly. The walls here had no more carvings, no more warnings. The monks had left their story behind at the threshold.

From here, I was on my own.

The air grew thicker, pressing against my skin like damp cloth. The light of my torch flickered, though there was no wind, the flame stretching oddly in one direction, then another. I exhaled slowly, watching as the breath left my lips and curled away from me—not drifting forward, but to the left, as if pulled by something unseen.

That was when I knew.

I had entered the Midnight Labyrinth.

It began subtly. The corridor ahead seemed straight, but when I glanced back, the passage I had come from was gone. I turned a slow circle, my jaw tightening. The walls around me remained unchanged, yet I could feel that something had shifted.

Light behaved strangely here. My torch cast long shadows that stretched in impossible directions. At times, the flame appeared distant, as if I were holding it at arm's length when it was still in my grasp.

I took a step forward.

The sound of my boot echoed twice.

I stopped, pulse steady, and waited.

A heartbeat later, a third step sounded.

I was not alone.

I turned sharply, my grip tightening on my weapon. There was nothing—only the shifting glow of my flame, the warped stone walls that seemed to stretch and contract as I watched them.

I moved forward again, careful, deliberate. This was no ordinary passage. It did not lead anywhere—it simply existed, curling in upon itself, pulling me deeper the longer I remained.

The monks had designed this place for one purpose—to mislead, to confuse, to trap.

I tested the walls with my fingers, following the ridges in the stone, marking my path with the blade of my knife. I took another turn—then another. But when I looked down, I saw the same markings I had just made, already waiting for me.

A path walked before I had even begun.

The labyrinth was not just shifting. It was remembering.

The flame of my torch elongated suddenly, stretching impossibly high, bending upward as if caught by an unseen force. The darkness around me thinned—not dispersing, but withdrawing, peeling back just enough for me to glimpse what lay ahead.

A corridor of arches, tall and narrowing, stretching forward into infinity. The farthest ones blurred, as though I were seeing them through water or glass. The space between them twisted, distorting like a mirage.

I took a slow breath.

There was a way forward. But the labyrinth did not play fair.

Distances shifted. Steps taken forward might move me backward.

And something was watching from beyond the arches, its shape just out of sight.

Waiting.

I exhaled and stepped forward, knowing that whatever lay ahead, the labyrinth would never let me leave unchanged.

The Midnight Labyrinth

The Midnight Labyrinth was alive.

Not in the way a beast is alive, with hunger and breath, but in the way a dream is alive—shifting, warping, pulling me deeper before I could even register that I had moved.

I walked forward, only to find that forward was no longer where I had been going.

Corridors stretched when I did not look at them. Doorways I had passed a moment before were gone when I turned back. The moment I committed a path to memory, the stones rearranged themselves, reshaping the world around me in subtle, quiet defiance of reason.

I ran my fingers along the nearest wall, feeling for a ridge, a groove—some kind of marker to track where I had been. My blade scraped the stone as I carved a shallow mark. I took three steps ahead, then turned back.

The mark was still there.

I let out a slow breath.

Then I stepped forward again.

And the mark was gone.

I exhaled through my nose, steadying myself. The labyrinth was playing its game now. The monks had not simply built a maze—they had created a prison of perception, a place where the world unraveled and rewove itself each time I blinked.

A door stood ahead, slightly ajar. It had not been there before, of that I was certain. A single black archway, yawning open into a chamber beyond.

I took another step.

The door slammed shut.

I stopped. Waited.

A new door appeared to my left, then another further ahead.

Choices.

But were they mine to make? Or had the labyrinth already decided?

I tested the nearest door, pressing my palm against the wood.

It vanished.

Not dissolved. Not collapsed. Just ceased to be, as though it had never existed at all.

I exhaled.

Nothing here was real, but everything was true.

A distant sound echoed from somewhere deep within the maze—a slow, deliberate scraping, as if something heavy was being dragged across stone.

I did not know where it was coming from.

And worse—I did not know if it was getting closer.

The sound of dragging stone did not fade. It did not grow closer, nor did it retreat. It simply was, a constant, grinding presence that echoed through the shifting halls. A trick of the labyrinth, perhaps, or something worse—something waiting.

I moved forward, choosing a path at random, knowing the illusion of choice was all I had. The stone underfoot felt softer than before, as if worn smooth by countless footsteps. The air was thicker now, damp with something that smelled of deep rot, of stagnant breath.

Then I saw the first sign.

A smear along the wall, black and wet, as if something with too many limbs had dragged itself along the surface. It glistened under the dim light, pulsing faintly, like a wound that had never healed.

I ran a hand along my weapon's hilt, keeping my grip steady.

Something else had walked this path before me.

The corridor ahead rippled.

Not a breeze. Not a shadow. A pulse, like breath expanding and collapsing.

And then I saw it.

A shape just beyond the reach of my torchlight, its form refusing to stay still. Not one thing, but many—a twisting mass of limbs that were not limbs, shifting and coiling through the darkness. The stone walls seemed to fold around it, as if the labyrinth itself were bending to make room for its presence.

It did not move like a beast, nor like a man. It did not move at all, yet it was never in the same place twice.

I had seen creatures that lurked before, waiting in the dark for prey to stumble into their grasp. But this thing—the Nameless Maw—was different.

It did not wait.

It chose.

And it had chosen me.

The air pressed tighter. The corridor around me felt smaller.

The Maw did not rush forward. It did not need to. It waited for weakness.

I forced my breath steady, my muscles tensed. I would not give it what it wanted.

It shuddered, its shifting tendrils peeling away from the walls, retreating for now. But not far. Never far.

It was waiting for my strength to fail.

And when it did, it would be there.

The Nameless Maw had not followed, but I could still feel it. The weight of its presence lingered, coiled around the edges of my mind, waiting. Always waiting.

The labyrinth gave me no time to gather myself. The moment I stepped beyond the last corridor, the walls shifted again, opening into a vast, circular chamber.

The air felt different here, thinner yet heavy with something I could not name. I took a slow breath, and that was when I heard them.

The whispers.

Not the distant murmurs of ghosts, nor the layered voices of the dead. These were clearer, sharper. I frowned, glancing around. The chamber was empty. Yet I could hear someone speaking.

Then I realized.

It was my own voice.

"Where does this path lead?" I asked aloud, testing the sound.

And before my words had even fully left my lips, a whisper answered me—my voice, speaking from the dark.

"Where does this path lead?"

It mimicked me before I had spoken. The words echoed a second too soon, as though they had already been spoken in a moment I had not yet reached.

I turned sharply, my hand resting on my weapon.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Who are you?" the voice whispered back.

A trick. A distortion of time, a fracture in the space of the labyrinth itself. The monks had not built this place to be solved—they had built it to break the mind of those who entered.

I clenched my jaw, pushing forward, ignoring the whispers as they answered every thought before I had formed it.

Then I looked up.

The chamber's ceiling stretched impossibly high, carved with thousands of tiny glowing points—stars, constellations, shifting and reforming before my eyes.

A map.

But not one meant to guide me.

The False Star Chamber.

Some of the constellations were real. Some were lies. The monks had built this place to confuse, to mislead, to make those who walked this path doubt their every step. The wrong path would only lead me deeper, twisting the labyrinth upon itself.

I exhaled, focusing.

The stars moved as I stared at them, shifting position in the corners of my vision. Some pulsed faintly, like a heartbeat. Others dimmed when I looked directly at them.

A puzzle of perception, a game of doubt.

The correct path was here. But to find it, I would have to trust what I did not yet know.

The labyrinth was testing me.

And if I failed, I would never leave.

The stars above still twisted in their false patterns as I moved forward, tracing my path carefully through the chamber. Every step felt deliberate, every breath measured. The labyrinth wanted me to lose myself, but I would not yield.

Beyond the star chamber, the corridors of the labyrinth narrowed, pressing close like the ribs of a dying beast. The walls here were not stone—they were something else, something smooth, too smooth, as if they had never been carved but had simply existed. The air smelled of damp earth and old dust, but beneath that was another scent—iron and decay.

Then, the doors appeared.

Massive, ancient, made of blackened wood and cold iron, each door loomed like the entrance to a forgotten tomb. I stepped closer, my fingers brushing the surface of one. It was locked,

though there was no keyhole, no handle, no hinge. It was as if the door had been sealed into place by something older than craftsmanship.

And it was not the only one.

More doors lined the corridor, some slightly ajar, others closed completely, but none could be opened. It was as though the labyrinth had created them only to taunt me with paths I could not take.

I pressed forward, past the doors, feeling the weight of unseen things behind them. And then, in the dim glow of my torch, I saw the pedestal.

A low stone altar, nestled in the center of a crossroad where the labyrinth split into three twisting corridors. Upon it rested a key—but not one of metal or wood.

It was carved of shadow itself.

Not darkness. Shadow.

It shimmered faintly, shifting in and out of existence, flickering as if caught between two realities. I stepped closer, wary, but no traps sprang from the ground. No creatures stirred.

The monks had left this here on purpose.

A test? A reward?

Or a warning?

I reached out and took the key.

The moment my fingers closed around it, the torch in my other hand flickered violently.

The walls shuddered.

And then, somewhere deep within the labyrinth, a door that had been locked for centuries creaked open.

I exhaled slowly.

The Shadow Key.

A relic not meant to open doors built by men, but doors that should never have existed at all.

I turned back toward the sealed doors.

Now, I had the means to open them.

The only question was—should I?

The weight of the Shadow Key in my palm felt light, almost insubstantial, as though it were never meant to be held—only to be found.

The doors around me had not changed. They still stood as they were, massive and unmoving, their surfaces untouched by time. And yet, now that I held the key, I could feel something behind them.

Something that had been waiting.

A whisper of wind curled through the corridor—not a true wind, not the stirring of air through empty spaces, but something colder. It wrapped around me, coiling at my feet, pressing against my skin. My breath misted in the dim torchlight.

I froze.

The warmth in my body was leaving me.

I turned slowly.

There, in the shifting blackness beyond my light, he stood.

The Cold Man.

He was little more than a silhouette at first, a shape that refused to be solid, darker than the surrounding shadows. The longer I stared, the clearer he became.

A figure tall and thin, wrapped in tattered robes that hung too long, dragging along the stone. His hands were hidden, but I could see the tips of his fingers where the sleeves ended—bone-white and frozen, as though touched by deep frost.

His face was the worst of it.

Not a skull. Not flesh. Something in between. A visage stretched thin, his skin cracked like ice over still water, his lips a frozen rictus that had long forgotten the shape of warmth. His eyes—if he even had them—were nothing more than hollows, dark and endless, yawning pits that swallowed the light without reflection.

He did not move.

He only watched.

And yet I could feel him.

The warmth continued to bleed from my body, as though the air around him refused to allow heat to exist in his presence. My fingers numbed, the edges of my vision blurred, my thoughts slowed.

The labyrinth had played its games. It had twisted the path, bent the light, reshaped itself to lead me deeper, but this—this was something else.

The Cold Man had not been waiting for me.

He had been waiting for this moment.

His presence had always been here, lingering, watching from the places where the torchlight failed to reach. I had ignored him in the whispers, in the shifting air, in the unnatural stillness of the deeper corridors.

But now, I had the key.

And he had decided it was time to step forward.

His breath came slow and steady, curling in the freezing air like mist rising from an untouched grave. The temperature dropped further. My heartbeat felt sluggish. My fingers stiffened, my knees locked.

I could not stay here.

I had to move.

I took a step back, careful, deliberate. The Cold Man did not follow, did not shift.

He only tilted his head, the slow, unnatural motion of something that was remembering how to move.

Then, from the hollow pit of his throat, came the faintest sound.

A whisper.

My name.

I turned and ran.

And as I did, I felt the shadows stretch toward me, reaching.

He was coming.

The Cold Man

The cold did not lift.

Even after I had fled from the Cold Man’s gaze, even after the labyrinth shifted and twisted to place more distance between us, the chill remained. It clung to my skin, settled deep in my bones, dulling my fingers and slowing my breath.

I pressed on, pushing through corridors that had not been there before, stepping into rooms that had no entrance but now offered no exit. The Midnight Labyrinth was testing me. But I was not alone.

The first sign was the sound—a faint, shuddering breath, ragged and uneven. A voice followed, barely more than a whisper, but not the Cold Man's.

"Not here… not here… not here…"

I slowed my steps.

The corridor ahead widened into a small chamber, its walls slick with frost. The floor was scattered with brittle icicles, tiny shards of frozen moisture that had no right to exist so far beneath the earth.

And then I saw him.

A man, slumped against the far wall, his back pressed into the cold stone, his arms wrapped around himself in a feeble attempt at warmth. His robes—once thick, meant for protection against the damp—were stiff with frost, the edges rimed with white. His breath came slow, curling in the dim light like mist over a frozen river.

His lips had split from the cold, his skin pale with that unnatural blue tinge, the kind that came before the body stopped feeling the cold altogether.

I took a careful step forward. His eyes snapped open.

"No—no, no, no," he whispered, scrambling away despite his body's clear weakness. His fingers left smears of frost against the ground as he pulled himself back. "He's close. You have to—have to leave."

"Who?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

His breathing stuttered. His fingers twitched, his nails cracked and broken from scraping at the stone. His head shook, too fast, too desperate.

"He embraces you," the man whispered, voice thin and brittle. "You think you'll shiver, but it doesn't work like that. The cold… it becomes you. It pulls you in, deeper, deeper, until there's nothing left but frost."

His words sent a fresh chill through my spine.

"He touched you?" I asked.

His mouth opened, but no sound came out. Instead, he lifted one trembling hand.

I stiffened.

His fingers—his entire arm—had begun to turn black with frost, veins like cracks in brittle ice, stretching from his fingertips toward his elbow. The flesh was stiff, frozen solid, yet he still moved it as if the muscles still obeyed.

He stared at it for a long moment, then laughed—a hollow, broken sound.

"I don't feel it anymore," he murmured. "That's the trick, you see. First, it hurts. Then, it stops. And then, you stop."

I clenched my jaw. "How long have you been down here?"

He looked at me then, and his eyes—black with frostbitten veins—held something worse than madness.

"I don't remember," he said. "But I know he's coming."

The air shuddered.

Somewhere behind me, a breath—slow, deliberate, cold—filled the corridor.

The survivor's lips trembled, his head jerking in a silent plea.

"You have to run."

The breath behind me was not mine.

It came slow and deliberate, a whisper of frost that coiled against my back, sinking into my skin like ice-tipped fingers pressing between my ribs. The air thickened, and for the first time, I understood what true cold felt like—not the bite of winter, not the slow freeze of a dying fire, but something older, something hungrier.

The survivor pressed himself against the wall, his half-frozen fingers twitching, his breath coming in rapid, shallow gasps. "Run," he rasped again, but his voice was already weaker than before. His body knew—he was already lost.

I turned.

And he was there.

The Cold Man did not step forward. He did not glide like a specter, nor lunge like a beast. He simply was, standing just within the shifting gloom of the labyrinth, his tall, skeletal frame wrapped in the tattered remnants of robes that should not have endured the centuries.

His hollowed face remained motionless, the frost-split skin stretched tight, his mouth frozen into something that was almost a smile, but not quite.

But his eyes…

There were no eyes.

Only voids, dark pits of frostbitten hunger where light did not dare to linger.

I stepped back, every instinct screaming at me to move, to run. But the air had grown heavy, thick with cold, dragging at my limbs. My fingers, even wrapped around my weapon, were stiffening.

The Cold Man tilted his head.

And then, the warmth in my chest pulled away.

Not like a sudden gust of wind. Not like the gradual onset of freezing air. It was being stolen, pulled from me in invisible strands, siphoned into the air itself.

The pain was immediate. My lungs ached, my fingers numbed, my breath came slower than it should. The survivor beside me whimpered softly, his body curling inward. I could see the frost creeping along his skin now, moving faster, claiming him.

This was not magic. Not a simple curse.

This was something far worse.

The Cold Man did not attack in the way a beast would. He did not need claws or fangs or weapons. He did not need to chase.

He only needed time.

And if I stayed still, if I faltered for even a moment—he would take the last of my warmth, and I would become like him.

The frost coiled at my legs, slowing my movement, but I forced myself to run.

The Cold Man did not follow.

He did not need to.

He simply stood there, watching, waiting, as I stumbled forward, my limbs growing heavier with every second.

I had delayed him.

But I had not escaped.

Not yet.

The cold never truly left. Even as I ran, even as I forced my limbs to move and my breath to quicken, I could still feel it—pressing against my back, lingering beneath my skin. The Cold Man did not need to chase me. His presence alone was enough to drain the warmth from my bones.

But I was not alone in this place.

There were others who had not escaped.

I stumbled into the next chamber, the frost clinging to my limbs, the heat of my body fighting against the growing chill. The corridor had given way to something vast, a cavernous room lined with ice, where the walls shimmered with frozen condensation, thick like glass. The air hung heavy with silence, the kind that made even my own breath seem unwelcome.

And then I saw her.

A child, no more than ten, standing in the center of the chamber, her small form locked inside a pillar of ice.

Her dress, once simple and woolen, clung to her tiny frame, frozen stiff. Her hair, long and dark, fanned around her shoulders, strands suspended in the ice like a creature caught in amber.

And her eyes were open.

I hesitated.

She was dead—she should have been dead—but her lips parted slightly, as though she had only just now begun to breathe.

Then, without warning, her voice entered my thoughts.

Not spoken. Not whispered. But felt, curling through my mind like the remnants of a half-remembered dream.

"He came when the bells rang."

I stiffened.

"The monks prayed, but the prayers did not stop him."

My fingers curled into a fist. "Who are you?"

For a moment, there was no answer. Then, her voice came again, softer, distant, as if she was speaking across centuries.

"I was the last."

The air around her pulsed, and suddenly, my vision blurred.

For an instant—just an instant—I saw another world.

The monastery, whole and untouched, filled with robed monks kneeling before the great bell tower, their voices raised in frantic prayer. The wind howled outside, rattling the wooden beams, as a figure stood at the threshold, his robes dragging against the stone, his breath curling in tendrils of frost.

Then, the vision shattered, and I was back in the frozen cavern, staring at the girl locked in ice.

"You will see him again," she murmured in my mind. *"And when you do… you must not listen when he speaks your name."*

The ice around her pulsed once, then dimmed.

The vision was over.

But the warning remained.

I left the frozen girl behind, pushing further into the labyrinth, my limbs still aching from the Cold Man's touch. My body screamed for warmth, for fire, for sanctuary.

And then, impossibly, I found it.

The corridor opened into a chamber of light.

Not torchlight. Not moonlight. But warmth.

At the very center of the room, a circle of golden heat pulsed softly, its glow illuminating the ancient stone. Within that circle lay a monk's body, untouched by time. His robes were pristine, his face unwrinkled, his hands folded gently over his chest as though he had merely laid down to rest.

The Cold Man's touch had never reached him.

I stepped forward, feeling the warmth press against my skin, my breath finally no longer visible in the air. It was a sensation I had already begun to forget.

Who was he?

A final guardian? A monk who had discovered the secret to resisting the Cold Man?

Or something else entirely?

I knelt beside him. His chest did not rise. His breath did not stir.

And yet, his lips moved.

I tensed, leaning closer, waiting, listening.

And then, in a voice softer than the wind, he spoke:

"You do not have long."

His eyes opened.

And the warmth around me began to fade.

The warmth from the chamber did not last. The golden glow that had embraced me moments before thinned, curling away like dying embers, retreating into the cold.

The monk's eyes were open now—clouded, gray, unblinking. His lips barely moved, his voice brittle, like old parchment crumbling beneath unseen hands.

"He was one of us."

The words sent a fresh chill through me.

"The last abbot."

I exhaled slowly, steadying myself. "The Cold Man?"

The monk's fingers twitched, curling slightly against his chest, but the rest of him remained utterly still.

"Not at first." His voice cracked with the weight of centuries, yet he spoke as though no time had passed at all. "He was like me. Like them. A servant of the order." His throat moved with the effort of swallowing. "A warden."

The word settled in my chest like a stone.

I thought back to the engravings in the labyrinth, the monks surrounding the abyss, their hands raised not in prayer, but in ritual. They had not been seeking salvation. They had been trying to contain something.

I looked down at the monk before me. "What did he do?"

For the first time, the monk's gaze shifted—to me, locking onto mine, though his pupils remained lost beneath the haze of time.

"He listened."

The wind outside the chamber howled softly, a long breath through the dead corridors of the labyrinth. The warmth faded further.

"When the darkness whispered, the others turned away. They prayed. They begged. But he —" The monk's throat bobbed. "He heard the voice. And he answered."

A bargain. A pact.

The last abbot had made a choice.

And it had unmade him.

I felt the weight of realization settle over me. The Cold Man had not come from outside the monastery—he had been born within it. The very figure meant to protect the world from the thing below had been the one to open the door.

The monk's body shuddered.

The last embers of warmth died.

The cold returned, sharp and immediate, curling around my ribs, stealing the breath from my lungs. The air in the chamber cracked with frost, creeping along the stone, devouring the last remnants of heat.

The monk exhaled one final breath.

"The Black Throne."

His voice was barely a whisper now, a thread of sound dissolving into the dark.

"That is where he waits."

His eyes closed. His body stiffened.

And then, as though he had never been there at all, he was gone—nothing but dust.

I rose slowly, the chill settling into my bones.

The Black Throne.

The true heart of the monastery. The place where the last abbot had broken his oath.

And where the true horror awaited.

I turned toward the next passage, my fingers tightening around my weapon.

It was time to finish this.

The Chamber of Echoes

The whisper of my name faded, swallowed by the vastness of the cathedral. The voices had not ceased. If anything, they had grown stronger, layered upon each other like the wailing of the lost.

Then came the chanting.

Low and droning, distant at first. A rhythmic murmur that reverberated through the cathedral's impossible walls, seeping into the very stone. It was the sound of prayer without devotion, ritual without hope.

I stepped forward.

The chanting grew louder.

From the depths of the cathedral, through the black arches of unseen halls, they came.

A procession of monks, draped in tattered robes, their bodies little more than hollow remnants of what they once were. Their heads were bowed, their hands clasped in silent prayer, their lips moving in steady, wordless repetition. The glow of unseen lanterns cast a faint, sickly light over them as they moved forward—a slow, unbroken march toward the great doors at the far end of the chamber.

Toward the throne room.

I watched, breath held, as they passed before me. Some still had flesh, stretched too tight over bone, frozen in expressions of pain or quiet madness. Others were nothing but skeletal frames, bound in unraveling cloth, moving as though something unseen still guided them.

They did not see me.

They did not see anything.

They only moved forward, their forms wavering, caught between moments of existence.

The Echo-bound Monks.

Trapped in the moment of their final prayer, forever marching toward the end they could not escape.

For a moment, I considered letting them pass. They were not here, not truly. Just remnants. Just echoes.

Then, one of them turned its head.

A slow, unnatural movement, the creaking of bones that had forgotten how to bend. A face, eyeless and half-decayed, peered at me from beneath its hood. The lips did not stop moving, but the voice changed.

The others froze.

The chant warped, twisting from empty ritual into something else. The air itself shifted, and the cathedral blurred—not disappearing, but unraveling.

The past was bleeding through.

The monks were no longer just echoes.

They were aware.

And they did not want me here.

A second monk turned. Then a third. Heads snapping toward me in unison.

The procession of the doomed had noticed me.

And now, I was part of their ritual.

I broke away from the doomed procession, my steps swift but measured. The air stretched and contracted, the echoes of the monks' final prayers scraping against the walls, pulling at the edges of reality. I needed distance, a place to think, to regain my bearings before I reached the Black Throne.

The cathedral offered no mercy. Every shadow loomed, every corridor wound back into itself, but then—I saw the door.

A small, half-collapsed archway, barely visible through the shifting light. It was wrong, misplaced, as though the labyrinth had forgotten to consume it. The stone above the entrance was carved with symbols—not the twisted, heretical runes of the labyrinth, but holy markings, faded but untouched by the corruption around them.

A sanctuary?

I stepped inside.

The room beyond was quiet, but not empty.

It was a shrine—or what remained of one. The Weeping Reliquary.

Fragments of shattered relics lay scattered across the floor—blades broken at the hilt, chalices blackened by fire, pages of scripture torn and unreadable. The air here was thick with sorrow, not despair, but loss. This was where the last of the monastery's faithful had made their stand.

And they had failed.

At the center of the chamber stood a single altar, unbroken. A candle burned upon it.

It was small, unremarkable—just a stub of wax, its flame flickering in defiance of the dark. But I felt its power before I even stepped closer.

The Candle of Saint Aelric.

The last light of the monastery.

It should have burned out long ago, yet it still flickered, golden and steady, untouched by the cold rot that had devoured everything else. It was a light that Vaelrith's corruption could not reach.

I reached for it—then stopped.

Something whispered at the edge of my mind.

The candle could be taken, but it was not free.

I saw the words now, carved into the base of the altar, their meaning forming in my thoughts before I could process them.

"A price must be paid. To remember the flame, one must let go of the past."

Memories.

The candle would burn only so long as I fed it something of myself.

A piece of my past—a name, a face, a moment. It would be gone, forgotten, unwritten.

Was the sanctuary it provided worth the sacrifice?

I stared into the flickering flame, feeling its warmth against my frozen skin. The dark beyond the chamber was waiting, and Vaelrith was watching.

The choice was mine.

The corridor stretched long and silent, its smooth walls unnaturally polished, untouched by dust or time. Unlike the rest of the monastery, where decay had crept into every crevice, this place had remained pristine, waiting. The light from my torch flickered oddly here, as though hesitant to reveal what lay ahead. And then I saw it.

A mirror.

It reached from floor to ceiling, a perfect sheet of glass spanning the entire passageway. The surface was flawless—no cracks, no distortion—just a pane of undisturbed reflection. I took a step closer, and my own image stared back, unchanged but unsettlingly still. The weight in my chest tightened as I lifted my hand. My reflection did not move.

A chill curled down my spine.

Then, slowly, the figure in the glass smiled.

Not a grin, not a sneer, but a knowing, deliberate smile, the kind that suggested understanding where there should be none. I took another step forward, and this time my reflection stepped back, the smile lingering. Then, behind it, movement. Shadows stirred in the depths of the mirror, shifting like smoke, forming shapes that should not be there. I recognized them before I even understood what I was seeing.

They were me.

Not just one, but many. Figures emerged from the darkness of the glass, stepping into view like echoes drawn from forgotten time. Some were familiar—versions of myself frozen in past failures, in moments I had tried to bury. One stood with slumped shoulders, shaking its head, mirroring the way I had once looked when I had left someone behind to die. Another knelt, blood smeared across its hands, whispering something I could not hear. A third had no eyes, only empty sockets weeping dark rivulets, its lips moving soundlessly in mocking laughter.

The air thickened, pressing against my ribs.

I turned my head, glancing at the corridor behind me, but there was nothing—no sign of these figures in the real world. They existed only in the mirror, but that was enough.

"You won’t leave this place," my own voice murmured from the glass.

I clenched my fists, steadying my breath.

The mirror was not just showing memories—it was testing me, weighing my regrets, my doubts, my sins. If I let it take hold, if I let the images define me, then the reflection would not remain just a reflection. It would become truth.

A test of will.

If I succumbed, if I let myself believe these visions, then Vaelrith would already have his victory. The fear, the doubt—it would cling to me, weakening me before I even reached the Black Throne.

I took another step forward. The reflections wavered, twisting, their voices rising in layered whispers. My own past sneered at me from the other side of the glass, mocking every choice, every failure. I met my own gaze and let the voices speak—but I did not listen.

Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, the figures in the glass blinked out of existence.

My reflection was my own again, standing silent and still. The test was over. But something in the glass still shimmered, faint and waiting, as if it knew I would return.

The mirror’s reflection lingered in my mind long after I had left it behind, the weight of its whispers pressing against my thoughts like an old wound. But the path ahead did not wait. The corridor stretched forward, narrower than before, its walls curving inward, funneling me toward the final threshold. The air was still, thick with the quiet of a place long forgotten.

Then I saw him.

At the end of the passage, where the corridor widened into an antechamber before the Black Throne, stood a knight clad in rusted plate, his armor scorched and broken, his body rigid with time’s cruel grip. He did not move at first, merely stood as though waiting, his blade planted before him, its tip embedded in the cold stone. A tattered black cloak, edged in faded silver, hung from his shoulders, its frayed ends drifting in an unseen wind.

The Hollow Knight.

His presence was suffocating, a pressure that settled in my lungs, in my bones. His helm was battered, the visor half-shattered, revealing only darkness beneath. Yet somehow, I knew he was watching me.

"You seek the Throne," came the voice from within the armor, dry and distant, as if spoken from the depths of a tomb. "You walk the path of those before you."

His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword.

"They all failed."

The last words were not a warning. They were a sentence.

Then he moved.

For a warrior whose body had endured ages of decay, his speed was impossible. His blade cut through the air like a whisper of steel, a strike meant not for battle, but for execution. I barely stepped back in time, the force of his attack shaking the ground where I had stood. The echoes of past failures clung to him, wrapped around his form like chains.

He had once come here as I had. He had once believed in victory.

Now, he was its last warning.

The Hollow Knight fought like a man who had already lost. Each strike was precise, relentless, not fueled by anger or vengeance, but by duty long decayed into despair. He did not seek to win—he sought to prove that I would lose.

But there was still something inside him, something buried beneath the rust and ruin.

As I dodged another blow, I spoke.

"You tried to slay him." My voice was steady, despite the weight of his strikes. "You came here believing it could be done."

His sword halted, if only for a breath.

"Hope is dead," he whispered, as if the words had been spoken a thousand times before.

"It only dies if you let it."

For the first time, his stance wavered. The weight of his failures held him as surely as his armor. For centuries, he had stood here, guarding a door that had never been opened, fighting those who came after him because he no longer believed they could succeed.

But belief could be rekindled, even in the long-dead.

His blade did not rise again. His fingers loosened around the hilt.

"If he is to fall…" the Hollow Knight said, his voice cracking beneath the weight of something older than time. "You must strike him not in flesh, but in memory. He does not fear steel. He does not fear fire. But he fears…"

The knight hesitated, as though struggling to recall the shape of the words.

"He fears what he once was."

His body stiffened. The last remnants of his purpose unraveled, and then, like a breath fading in the cold, he was gone.

His blade remained where he had stood, embedded in the stone. A relic of his failure—or a weapon for what lay ahead.

The doors to the Black Throne stood before me now, their surface carved with runes that twisted the longer I stared. Beyond them, Vaelrith waited.

And now, I knew his weakness.

The Throne of Midnight

The doors to the Black Throne opened without a sound. No creak of ancient hinges, no groan of stone grinding against stone—just silence, vast and waiting.

I stepped forward.

The air was heavier here, thick with something that felt like the weight of forgotten names and buried truths. The chamber beyond stretched impossibly large, its walls vanishing into the depths of darkness, where no torch or flame could reach. The architecture was both grand and wrong, shaped by something that had once understood what a throne room should look like but had since forgotten.

At the center of it all, bathed in a slow, pulsing glow, sat the throne.

Blackened and scorched, it was carved from stone that had long since turned to something less than solid, more than shadow. It was not merely a seat of power—it was a wound in the world, a place where something had settled itself between realms and refused to let go. The glow it emitted did not illuminate the chamber. Instead, it seemed to drink the light, swallowing it in steady, rhythmic pulses, as though the throne itself were breathing.

Something was watching me.

I did not see movement. I did not hear a sound.

But the shadows at my feet shifted.

The flickering light from the throne stretched them too far, bending them at odd angles. My own shadow lingered behind me when I moved forward, then twisted ahead of me before I could stop. The walls did not flicker as they should. Instead, they shuddered, the darkness clinging to them alive in a way that light had never been.

I took another step.

The shadows moved again.

Then, from somewhere unseen, something sighed.

A long, slow exhale, like the breath of something ancient roused from slumber. It was not the rush of wind, not the shifting of stone. It was intentional. Measured.

A presence.

Something here had been waiting.

Something knew I had come.

I took another step toward the throne. The air rippled.

And in the next breath, I was not alone.

The sigh that had slipped through the darkness deepened into something worse—a sound that was not quite speech, not quite breath, but something in between, as though the air itself had been taught to whisper. The shadows around the throne stretched, curling like blackened roots, unfurling into a shape that did not yet know what it wanted to be.

Then, he was there.

Vaelrith the Dying did not appear so much as become, his form assembling in fits and fractures, a half-built thing caught between the past and the present. One moment, he stood as a monk, his robes tattered, his hood drawn low, hands clasped in quiet reverence. The next, he flickered—a lich, wrapped in decay, bones wreathed in darkened silk, his fingers clawed and blackened with the remnants of spells long since spent. And then—a man, weeping, his shoulders trembling beneath the weight of something he had not the strength to name.

He was all of these things, and he was none of them.

A figure that had once been whole, now cracked into too many pieces to be mended.

His head lifted. His hollow sockets locked onto me—except, they were not always hollow. One breath, they were nothing but dark pits, empty voids swallowing the faint glow of the throne. The next, they were human eyes, red-rimmed and sunken, filled with something that might have once been regret.

Then, he spoke.

"You—" The word came fragmented, uneven. His head twitched, his voice breaking, as though spoken from too many throats at once. "Are you real?" His hands trembled. His form flickered. "Or… am I?"

The throne pulsed. The chamber shuddered.

Vaelrith swayed slightly, his long fingers flexing, tightening into fists, then releasing, like a man caught between anger and exhaustion.

"You stand where no one should stand," he murmured. "You speak where no words should be spoken. And yet, here you are." His fractured form steadied, as if forcing itself into one shape. The monk, the lich, the man—each trying to claim the body that no longer belonged to them.

Then, his voice softened, and for a moment, it was only human.

"Do you know," he asked, tilting his head, "how long I have waited?"

I did not answer.

Vaelrith sighed. He lifted a hand—his bones gleamed beneath peeling flesh, his nails cracked and blackened by centuries of rot, but the motion was almost… gentle.

"I am not your enemy," he said, though the words were brittle, struggling to hold their shape. "I could be so much more."

The throne's glow deepened.

Then, he smiled—and it was the smile of a man who had seen the end of all things and survived it.

"Walk away," he whispered. "Leave this place, and I will give you everything." His voice lowered, almost coaxing, the remnants of his human self clawing their way to the surface. "I will tell you the secrets of the abyss. I will grant you knowledge that the living were never meant to know."

His head tilted further. The man in him was pleading. The lich in him was calculating.

"Take what I offer," he murmured, his form flickering between the three, as though he himself did not know which version of him wanted this the most.

"And in return…"

His voice slipped into something colder, darker, deeper.

"Let me go."

The throne's pulsing glow stilled.

The air itself waited.

He was offering a bargain.

A chance to leave. A chance to take his power, his knowledge—his madness—and let him slip back into the world above.

All I had to do was say yes.

The chamber held its breath. Vaelrith’s broken form flickered, shifting between the man, the monk, and the lich, each one vying for dominance, each one wanting something different. The air trembled with the weight of his words, his offer lingering, waiting to be accepted.

I did not move.

"You would refuse?" His voice fractured, twisting between sorrow and fury. "You would cast away knowledge, power, truth—for what?"

His fingers twitched.

The throne pulsed.

The shadows behind him twisted, stretching like a wound reopening. The light in the room fractured, as if something unseen had splintered reality itself.

Then the world broke.

My feet were still planted before the throne, but suddenly, I was somewhere else.

Not the chamber. Not the monastery.

A memory.

I inhaled sharply, but the air was different—warm, familiar. My hands ached, not from cold, but from a past I had long since buried.

A familiar place. A familiar time. A moment I had lived before.

And I knew—it wasn’t real.

Vaelrith had not simply attacked.

He had dragged me into my own past.

I stood in a field, beneath a sky I had not seen in years. The air was thick with smoke, the scent of fire and blood clinging to my skin. Figures moved around me, some familiar, some blurred, as though their faces had been half-remembered in dreams.

Then I heard the scream.

I turned.

Someone I had failed was there—alive, whole, before the moment of their death.

Vaelrith’s voice curled around the edges of my mind, soft, insidious.

"Not everything is set in stone," he whispered.

"You can change this. You can save them."

I felt the weight of my weapon in my hand. My pulse pounded in my ears. The moment was real enough to feel.

I could move. I could act.

But if I did, if I let myself believe even for a second—

Vaelrith would have me.

I clenched my fists, resisting the pull.

The illusion faltered. The sky above me cracked. The ground beneath my feet shuddered, revealing flashes of the throne room beyond the false reality.

Vaelrith's form loomed above and around me, his shifting presence bleeding into the dreamscape, his voice digging into my thoughts.

"You fight for nothing," he whispered. "You suffer for nothing. I could give them back to you. I could make it right."

I fought against it, against the twisting of the past, against the pull of something that felt so real and yet wasn't.

The world splintered further.

The throne room reeled back into view, but the fight was far from over. Vaelrith had no need for blade or claw. He would tear me apart with my own regrets, drown me in memories that never were.

And if I could not hold on to what was real—

Then I would be lost forever.

Reality shattered. The throne room twisted around me, the echoes of my own past receding, torn apart as I wrenched myself free from Vaelrith's illusory grasp. The warmth of forgotten days, the ghosts of what could have been—all of it vanished, leaving only the cold, empty vastness of the chamber.

Vaelrith stood before the Black Throne, his form flickering violently, as if his very existence had become unstable. The monk, the man, the lich—none of them could hold control anymore. His fingers tore at his own face, his mouth widening in a silent scream as his body fractured.

The air turned to ice.

And then he broke.

Not into pieces—into three.

A surge of black energy erupted outward, sending my shadow writhing across the floor, the throne pulsing like a dying heart. Vaelrith's being split, unraveling into three distinct forms, each one carrying a fragment of what he once was, each one representing the pieces of his ruined soul.

The first form rose from the throne itself, a skeletal horror wrapped in chains of blackened iron, its bones scorched by the embers of undeath. The Dying King. His crown was twisted, jagged, barely clinging to a skull that should not have been able to move, and yet it did, its hollow sockets burning with a cold, unnatural glow.

His voice was not a whisper, not an echo, but a command—a ruler who had long since lost his kingdom, yet refused to relinquish his throne.

"You will bow before me," he intoned, his voice ancient and unyielding, the force of it pressing against my chest like the weight of a collapsing crypt. The chains lashed out, hungry, seeking to bind me, to pull me down into the same abyss that had swallowed him centuries ago.

The second form hovered above the ruined altar at the far end of the hall, a spectral wraith wrapped in a tattered cowl, his fingers moving in ceaseless gestures of an unfinished ritual. The Last Monk. His face was hidden beneath a veil of blackened cloth, but beneath it, his mouth never stopped moving—whispering curses, prayers turned to ash.

"There is no hope," he chanted, his voice an eerie monotone, layered over itself in a thousand voices, all speaking at once.

The longer I listened, the heavier my limbs felt, my vision darkening at the edges. His words were a siphon, bleeding strength, will, and certainty from the air itself. He did not fight with blade or fire—he fought with doubt, with the despair of a man who had prayed until his throat bled, only to be met with silence.

And then, from the deepest part of the chamber, where the shadows had never been disturbed, came the final form.

He did not rise like the others. He did not move like the others.

He was simply there.

The Cold Man.

No longer lurking at the edges of my journey, no longer a distant presence in the corners of my vision. He was whole now, no longer bound to the monastery's dying curse—he was Vaelrith's sorrow, the part of him that had never died, never faded, the part that had always been watching.

His hollow eyes locked onto me, empty pits where warmth had once lived.

His breath spread across the chamber, and I felt it sink into my bones.

No words. No grand declarations.

Just cold.

And then he moved.

The chamber was unraveling. The air trembled, the walls warped, and shadows no longer behaved as they should. The Dying King's chains lashed through the air, seeking to bind me in eternal servitude. The Last Monk's whispers filled my mind with doubt, the weight of despair clawing at my thoughts, urging me to give in, to kneel, to surrender. The Cold Man was everywhere and nowhere, the frost of his presence burrowing beneath my skin, slowing my limbs, stealing my warmth.

But Vaelrith was not invincible.

For all his power, all his horror, he was still bound to this place.

The Black Throne pulsed, its glow now erratic, desperate, as if it sensed what I had come to understand. It was not just a seat of power. It was a shackle, an anchor that held him here, feeding on the monastery's ruin, on the monastery's dead.

If I struck him, he would endure.

If I struck the throne, he would have nowhere left to return.

The Dying King loomed before me, his skeletal form shrouded in chains, a ruler of nothing, a corpse clinging to a crown. I evaded his grasp, pushing forward, forcing my way past the cursed monk's whispers, past the Cold Man's draining touch. The throne stood at the center of it all, cracked but not yet broken, pulsing like a dying heart.

Vaelrith's three forms screamed in unison.

"No!"

"You do not understand!"

"You will join me!"

They lunged, but it was too late.

I struck the Black Throne.

The first impact sent a shockwave through the air, cracking the stone beneath my feet. Vaelrith howled, his forms flickering wildly, torn between their fractured selves, between past and present, between existence and oblivion.

The second blow sent spidery fractures racing up the throne's surface, the pulsing light within it faltering, dimming.

Vaelrith collapsed, his skeletal form crumbling, his spectral body flickering, his frozen shade shuddering as if reality itself was rejecting him.

"You fools…" he gasped, his voice fading.

The final strike shattered the throne.

A deafening crack tore through the chamber as the Black Throne imploded, its form collapsing inward, dragging shadows, frost, and spectral energy into its breaking core. Vaelrith let out one last scream, not of rage, not of fury—but of loss.

His forms fractured, dissolved, and were unmade.

The throne was no more.

The curse of Gallowsmere was broken.

The air was still. The cold receded. The monastery was dying its final death.

But if I had hesitated, if I had faltered, if I had let fear or doubt stay my hand…

Vaelrith would have escaped.

And the world above would have never been the same.

The End or the Beginning ?

The Black Throne was gone.

Where it had stood, there was now nothing—not broken stone, not dust, but a gaping absence, a void where something had once existed beyond its right. The throne had not merely collapsed—it had ceased to be, and with it, Vaelrith's grip on this place had shattered.

But the monastery was dying.

The floor beneath me lurched, deep cracks splitting outward from the throne's ruin. The stone groaned like a wounded beast, and dust cascaded from the arched ceiling, shaken loose by the violent unraveling of the structure itself. The very foundation of the monastery was crumbling into the abyss it had long sealed.

I had seconds to escape.

The grand chamber's towering walls began to bend, as if centuries of weight had finally caught up with them. Columns that had stood untouched for ages tilted, their stonework grinding before crashing down, one after another. The once-imposing cathedral, a relic of forgotten rituals, was coming apart.

Then, voices.

If I had saved anyone—the blind scribe, the half-frozen survivor, any lingering souls who had resisted the Cold Man's embrace—they were here, stumbling from the side corridors, gasping for breath, clinging to the last shreds of hope I had given them.

"Move!" one of them cried, pulling another to their feet as debris rained down from above.

The exit was collapsing. If I hesitated, I would be buried with Vaelrith's memory.

The monastery had kept its secrets for centuries.

Now, it was sinking into the abyss it had so long feared.

And I had no intention of staying to join it.

The monastery was gone.

By the time I emerged into the ashen twilight, the mountain had swallowed it whole. Where once stood the broken towers, the rotted chambers, and the wretched throne of Vaelrith, there was now only a hollow wound in the earth, a void where something unclean had once festered. The ground still trembled beneath my feet, and for a moment, I thought I could hear the distant whisper of stone sinking into the dark, vanishing forever.

Gallowsmere lay below, untouched but changed.

The air no longer carried that unnatural bite of cold, no longer hummed with the unseen presence of something watching from beyond the veil. The town was not healed—not yet. It would take years before the last traces of fear faded from its streets, before the people ceased to glance over their shoulders at night, expecting to see shadows where none should be.

But the sickness that had plagued it—the whispering wells, the frozen corpses, the creeping, unnatural fear—was gone.

I had won.

Or at least, I thought I had.

Even as I stood beneath the open sky, feeling the first warmth I had known since stepping into the monastery, I could not shake the feeling that something remained.

Not Vaelrith—not his power, not his throne. Those were truly destroyed.

But the Cold Man.

He had never fought for power. He had never sought dominion. He was not like the others.

He was sorrow, regret, loss—things that could not be slain by steel or fire. I had destroyed the Black Throne, but had I undone what made him?

A breeze stirred through the valley, colder than it should have been.

I turned, scanning the distant treeline, watching the curling mist that clung to the edges of Gallowsmere.

For a moment, I swore I saw a figure standing there—tall, thin, unmoving.

Then it was gone.

The battle was over, but the Black Throne had left its mark.

I could still hear it, sometimes.

Not always. Not in words.

But in moments of quiet, when the night stretched long and my breath curled in the cold, I would remember. A flicker in my thoughts, a shadow in the edges of my vision. A whisper—not of Vaelrith, not of power, but of the place that had once bound him.

The monastery had collapsed. The throne was shattered.

But some doors, once opened, never truly close.

The monastery was gone, but Vaelrith was not.

I had failed.

Whether by hesitation, by deception, or by sheer force of will, he had slipped the bonds of this place, no longer bound to the throne that had once shackled him. The Black Throne may have cracked, the monastery may have crumbled, but Vaelrith endured.

And now, he was free.

The first signs will seem harmless—a strange chill lingering in places it does not belong, shadows stretching just a little too far, people waking from dreams they cannot remember, yet cannot shake. The air will feel thinner, the light a shade dimmer, as if something unseen is pressing against the fabric of the world.

And then, it will worsen.

In distant cities, cloaked figures will gather, speaking in tongues long forgotten. At the edges of the world, where ruins of past ages still stand, the dead will stir, their bodies whispering prayers in voices that do not belong to them. In Gallowsmere, those who survived the plague of fear will wake in the night, shivering, their breath curling in the dark—not from cold, but from something older.

And somewhere, unseen, Vaelrith watches.

He no longer needs a throne. He no longer needs a prison.

He has escaped the chains of place and time.

Now, he walks among the living.

I carry his mark.

It is not seen, not spoken, but felt. A weight in the chest, a heaviness in the bones. A knowing. Others will pass me on the streets and feel it too, though they won't understand why—the way a person senses an oncoming storm before the first thunder rolls.

At night, my reflection lingers a second too long.

In dreams, I stand before a throne that should not exist, where the whispers have never ceased.

I survived. But I did not leave unscathed.

Not all chains were broken.

Not all spirits faded into dust.

Somewhere in the depths of the monastery's ruins, beneath the collapsed stone and forgotten tunnels, something still stirs.

Or perhaps, worse still—he did not stay behind.

Perhaps, when I fled, he fled with me.

Not a wraith. Not a ghost.

But a presence, seated deep within my own mind. A part of me that was never mine to begin with.

And in the coldest moments of the night, when the wind stills and silence presses in, I feel it.

A breath, not my own.

And a whisper.

"I am still here."

The monastery was gone, its walls buried beneath the weight of time and ruin. The Black Throne had fallen, and whether Vaelrith was destroyed or unleashed, nothing could change the fact that I had walked away from that place different than when I entered.

But I was not the only one who had taken notice.

The first sign came within weeks. A stranger, cloaked and silent, watching from a tavern's corner. A letter left without a sender, detailing things no outsider should have known. Names of the fallen. Descriptions of the Cold Man, of the throne, of Vaelrith.

Then, the true message arrived.

"We know what you have seen. We know what you have done. We know that this was not the end.

"We will be watching."

It was no ordinary scholar, no royal agent who had taken an interest in the events at Gallowsmere. This was a society older than the monastery itself, a group that had spent centuries guarding, suppressing, erasing the evidence of things beyond mortal comprehension.

And now, they had taken an interest in me.

Would they seek to silence me before the truth spread too far? Or would they come with an offer—to fight the battle that had only just begun?

The ruins of Gallowsmere's monastery were supposed to be buried forever, left to sink into history, to be forgotten. But not all wounds heal cleanly.

Something still lingers there.

Travelers who pass too close at night report hearing strange noises from beneath the earth—not echoes of collapse, but whispers, thin and desperate, carried on the wind. Others swear that the path to the ruins is not always empty. That, on some nights, a tall figure in rags stands just at the edges of the mist, unmoving, waiting.

And then, there are the graves.

Many of the monks were buried long ago, before the monastery's corruption took hold. But now, the graves stand uneven, as if something has begun to push up from beneath.

Something was waking up.

Something older than Vaelrith.

Something that had never feared the throne, because the throne had never been meant to hold it.

The monastery was gone.

But its secrets were not.

And I knew, one day, I would have to return.

Time passed. The world moved on.

Seasons changed, the snows came and melted, and the name Vaelrith became little more than a fading nightmare. The monastery's ruins were left undisturbed, a scar upon the land that no one dared to mend. Gallowsmere was quiet again, though it was the kind of quiet that comes not from peace, but from the absence of something worse.

And then, one night—long after the battle had ended, long after the echoes of the past should have faded—one of us awoke.

The room was freezing.

Not the cold of a winter draft or an open window left ajar, but something deeper, older—the kind of cold that sank into bone, that made the air itself brittle. The fire in the hearth had long since died, but the frost creeping along the edges of the windowpanes was unnatural, spreading across the glass like reaching fingers.

Breath curled in the air—white, fragile, lingering too long before fading.

The silence pressed in, heavy, expectant.

Then, from just behind them, barely more than a breath:

"You remember me, don't you?"

The voice was thin, familiar, inescapable.

A whisper that should have died with the Black Throne.

A presence that should have been buried beneath stone and shadow.

A promise that had never truly left.

The cold deepened. The whisper curled into the air, waiting.

Somewhere, in the dark, the past was not finished.